

## Were the Nazis Socialists?

We look into the burning (at least for some) question of whether members of the National German Socialist Workers' Party were accurately classified as "socialists".

**DAVID EMERY**

The full name of Adolf Hitler's Nazi Party, the political movement that brought him to power and supplied the infrastructure of the fascist dictatorship over which he would preside, was *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei*, the National Socialist German Workers' Party. According to historians, the complicated moniker reveals more about the image the party wanted to project and the constituency it aimed to build than it did about the Nazis' true political goals, which were building a state based on racial superiority and brute-force governance.

Given that Nazism is traditionally held to be an extreme right-wing ideology, the party's conspicuous use of the term "socialist" — which refers to a political system normally plotted on the far-left end of the ideological spectrum — has long been a source of confusion, not to mention heated debate among partisans seeking to distance themselves from the genocidal taint of Nazi Germany.

The debate has heated up to the point of critical mass in recent years, thanks to the **rise** of nationalist political movements reacting in part to stagnant economic conditions and the perceived threat of globalism, and also in part to a flood of immigrants and foreign refugees pouring into Europe and the United States because of war and economic crises abroad.

A subset of these groups, identified as **ethno-nationalists**, hold racially-tinged views ranging from nativism (the belief that the interests of native-born people must be defended against encroachment by immigrants) to full-on, hate-mongering white supremacy. Some of the latter openly align themselves with historical Nazism, to the point of waving swastikas, spouting anti-Semitic rhetoric, and imitating the tactics of Adolf Hitler.

Add to this mix the ascendancy of President Donald Trump, who won the 2016 election in part by courting a nativist, anti-immigrant constituency, and whose reticent condemnation of white nationalist protesters who held a rally in Charlottesville, Virginia that erupted in fatal violence in August 2017 drew howls of criticism from all but his most loyal supporters, and the urgency of sorting out these political associations begins to make sense.

## The Nazi Problem

Nobody, least of all the millions of rank-and-file right-leaning Americans who voted for Donald Trump, wants to be lumped in with Nazis. It's a fact, however, that Nazi-friendly organizations, Nazi symbols, and Nazi gestures were in evidence at the disastrous Charlottesville event, whose unfortunate title was not "Unite the Left," but "Unite the Right."

Although the terms "left" and "right" as used in American politics can be somewhat less than perspicuous, they are helpful in delineating the basic ideological divide between liberalism/progressivism (as embodied mainly by the Democratic Party) on one side ("the left"), and conservatism/traditionalism (as embodied mainly by the Republican Party) on the other ("the right"). Seen as a spectrum or continuum of ideologies, socialism/communism traditionally falls on the far left end of this scale, nationalism/fascism on the far right.

The Nazi problem comes down to this: As an ultra-nationalist, socially conservative, anti-egalitarian and **fascist** ideology, Nazism naturally falls on the extreme far-right end of the political spectrum; but if it can be successfully argued that it's really a form of socialism, it would make more sense to place it on the far left. That being the case, it's becoming more and more common to encounter insistent polemics like this one published on the right-wing blog **UFP News**:

The Nazis were left-wing socialists. Yes, the National Socialist Workers Party of Germany, otherwise known as the Nazi Party, was indeed socialist and it had a lot in common with the modern left. Hitler preached class warfare, agitating the working class to resist "exploitation" by capitalists, particularly Jewish capitalists, of course. Their programs called for the nationalization of education, health care, transportation, and other major industries. They instituted and vigorously enforced a strict gun control regimen. They encouraged pornography, illegitimacy, and abortion, and they denounced Christians as right-wing fanatics. Yet a popular myth persists that the Nazis themselves were right-wing extremists. This insidious lie biases the entire political landscape today.

A similar argument is propounded in the 2017 book *The Big Lie: Exposing the Nazi Roots of the American Left* by Dinesh D'Souza, who maintains that Adolf Hitler himself was a "dedicated socialist":

In statement after statement, Hitler could not be clearer about his socialist commitments. He said, for example, in a 1927 speech, "We are socialists. We are the enemies of today's capitalist system of exploitation ... and we are determined to destroy this system under all conditions."

However, the assumption that because the word “socialist” appeared in the party’s name and socialist words and ideas popped up in the writings and speeches of top Nazis then the Nazis must have been actual socialists is naive and ahistorical. What the evidence shows, on the contrary, is that Nazi Party leaders paid mere lip service to socialist ideals on the way to achieving their one true goal: raw, totalitarian power.

### **Richard J. Evans: ‘It Would Be Wrong to See Nazism as a Form of, or an Outgrowth From, Socialism’**

Despite having declared, at various times, “I am a socialist,” “We are socialists,” and similar avowals, on a personal level Hitler displayed little regard for the actual tenets of socialism, or, for that matter, socialists themselves. This excerpt from a speech Hitler gave in 1922 (quoted in William L. Shirer’s *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, published in 1960) is indicative:

Whoever is prepared to make the national cause his own to such an extent that he knows no higher ideal than the welfare of the nation; whoever has understood our great national anthem, “Deutschland ueber Alles,” to mean that nothing in the wide world surpasses in his eyes this Germany, people and land — that man is a Socialist.

And this is what came out of Adolf Hitler’s mouth on another occasion when a comrade riled him by harping on socialism (as reported by Henry A. Turner, author of *German Big Business and the Rise of Hitler*, published in 1985):

Socialism! What does socialism really mean? If people have something to eat and their pleasures, then they have their socialism.

In his 2010 book *Hitler: A Biography*, British historian Ian Kershaw wrote that despite putting the interests of the state above those of capitalism, he did so for reasons of nationalism and was never a true socialist by any common definition of the term:

[Hitler] was wholly ignorant of any formal understanding of the principles of economics. For him, as he stated to the industrialists, economics was of secondary importance, entirely subordinated to politics. His crude social-Darwinism dictated his approach to the economy, as it did his entire political “world-view.” Since struggle among nations would be decisive for future survival, Germany’s economy had to be subordinated to the preparation, then carrying out, of this struggle. This meant that liberal ideas of economic competition had to be replaced by the subjection of the economy to the dictates of the national interest. Similarly, any “socialist” ideas in the Nazi programme had to follow the same dictates. **Hitler was never a socialist.** But although he upheld private property, individual entrepreneurship, and economic competition, and disapproved of trade unions and workers’ interference in the freedom of owners and managers to run their concerns, the state, not the market, would determine the shape of economic development. Capitalism was, therefore, left in place. But in operation it was turned into an adjunct of the state.

For members of the Nazi Party, in fact, defending socialism on its own terms was a risky activity which could result in ejection from the party, or worse. Of party leader and dissenter Otto Strasser (whose similarly-minded brother, Gregor, would ultimately be assassinated by the Nazis), William Shirer writes:

Unfortunately for him, he had taken seriously not only the word “socialist” but the word “workers” in the party’s official name of National Socialist German Workers’ Party. He had supported certain strikes of the socialist trade unions and demanded that the party come out for nationalization of industry. This of course was heresy to Hitler, who accused Otto Strasser of professing the cardinal sins of “democracy and liberalism.” On May 21 and 22, 1930, the Fuehrer had a showdown with his rebellious subordinate and demanded complete submission. When Otto refused, he was booted out of the party.

The plain truth, writes Historian Richard J. Evans in *The Coming of the Third Reich*, was that Hitler and his party saw socialism, communism, and leftism generally as inimical to everything they hoped to achieve:

In the climate of postwar counter-revolution, national brooding on the “stab-in-the-back,” and obsession with war profiteers and merchants of the rapidly mushrooming hyperinflation, Hitler concentrated especially on rabble-rousing attacks on “Jewish” merchants who were supposedly pushing up the price of goods: they should all, he said, to shouts of approval from his audiences, be strung up. Perhaps to emphasize this anti-capitalist focus, and to align itself with similar groups in Austria and Czechoslovakia, the party changed its name in February 1920 to the National Socialist German Workers’ Party.... **Despite the change of name, however, it would be wrong to see Nazism as a form of, or an outgrowth from, socialism.** True, as some have pointed out, its rhetoric was frequently egalitarian, it stressed the need to put common needs above the needs of the individual, and it often declared itself opposed to big business and international finance capital. Famously, too, anti-Semitism was once declared to be “the socialism of fools.” But from the very beginning, Hitler declared himself implacably opposed to Social Democracy and, initially to a much smaller extent, Communism: after all, the “November traitors” who had signed the Armistice and later the Treaty of Versailles were not Communists at all, but the Social Democrats.

## What Nazism Stood For

The National Socialists completely ignored socialism’s primary aim (replacing the existing class-based society with an egalitarian one in which workers owned the means of production) and substituted their own topsy-turvy agenda, Evans writes, “replacing class with race, and the dictatorship of the proletariat with the dictatorship of the leader”:

The “National Socialists” wanted to unite the two political camps of left and right into which, they argued, the Jews had manipulated the German nation. The basis for this was to be the idea of race. This was light years removed from the class-based ideology of socialism. Nazism was in some ways an extreme counter-ideology to socialism, borrowing much of its rhetoric in the process, from its self-image as a movement rather than a party, to its much-vaunted contempt for bourgeois convention and conservative timidity.

German historian and National Socialism expert Joachim Fest characterizes this repurposing of socialist rhetoric as an act of “prestidigitation”:

This ideology took a leftist label chiefly for tactical reasons. It demanded, within the party and within the state, a powerful system of rule that would exercise unchallenged leadership over the “great mass of the anonymous.” And whatever premises the party may have started with, by 1930 Hitler’s party was “socialist” only to take advantage of the emotional value of the word, and a “workers’ party” in order to lure the most energetic social force. As with Hitler’s protestations of belief in tradition, in conservative values, or in Christianity, the socialist slogans were merely movable ideological props to serve as camouflage and confuse the enemy.

The proof was in the pudding. Not long after acquiring the reins of power, the Nazis banned the Social Democratic Party and sent its leaders and other leftists identified as threats to the National Socialist program to concentration camps. According to the [Holocaust Encyclopedia](#):

In the months after Hitler took power, SA and Gestapo agents went from door to door looking for Hitler's enemies. They arrested Socialists, Communists, trade union leaders, and others who had spoken out against the Nazi party; some were murdered. By the summer of 1933, the Nazi party was the only legal political party in Germany. Nearly all organized opposition to the regime had been eliminated. Democracy was dead in Germany.

Despite continuing certain Weimar-era social welfare programs, the Nazis proceeded to restrict their availability to "racially worthy" (non-Jewish) beneficiaries. In terms of labor, worker strikes were outlawed. Trade unions were replaced by the party-controlled German Labor Front, primarily tasked with increasing productivity, not protecting workers. In lieu of the socialist ideal of an egalitarian, worker-run state, the National Socialists erected a party-run police state whose governing structure was anti-democratic, rigidly hierarchical, and militaristic in nature. As to the redistribution of wealth, the socialist ideal "From each according to his ability, to each according to his need" was rejected in favor of a credo more on the order of "Take everything that belongs to non-Aryans and keep it for the master race."

Above all, the Nazis were German white nationalists. What they stood for was the ascendancy of the "Aryan" race and the German nation, by any means necessary. Despite co-opting the name, some of the rhetoric, and even some of the precepts of socialism, Hitler and party did so with utter cynicism, and with vastly different goals. The claim that the Nazis actually were leftists or socialists in any generally accepted sense of those terms flies in the face of historical reality.



**HELP SUPERCHARGE SNOPE'S FOR 2020**

SINCE 1994

We have big plans. We need your help.

[Become a member!](#)

BY [DAVID EMERY](#)